



## **Realization of Initiation, Response, and Feedback in Teacher-Student Interactions in EFL Classrooms: Learning Realities and Opportunities**

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the representation of the Initiation, Response, Feedback (IRF) cycle in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Video recordings have been used to collect data from 10 classes, which were managed by 8 L2 teachers. In total, 900 minutes of video recordings with 784 triadic patterns were collected. Using Conversation Analysis (CA), the findings demonstrated that the IRFs in classroom interactions were disclosed in various ways. The coding system revealed that the teachers generally used authentic and focused questions. In the F stage, the teachers used elaboration, scaffolding, correction, and refusal strategies. The F stage was also a rich juncture for local contingencies as the teachers' productions were contingent on the students' responses. Likewise, uptake and scaffolding have been important elements in the IRF patterns. The analysis suggests that the third stage can create an ad-hoc co-constructive classroom interaction and provide L2 learners with various learning opportunities.

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## 1. Introduction

Classroom interaction has been examined by many scholars in the field of mainstream education and L2 pedagogy. They have particularly delved into the possible connections between teaching and L2 development because they are achieved in interaction (Hall, 2020). “Individuals are socialized THROUGH language to USE language” (Hall, 2020, p. 1). Classroom interactions between language teachers and L2 learners are considered to be consequential in affording L2 learners with an opportunity to be exposed to a rich learning milieu and maximizing their L2 development (Hall & Walsh, 2002). Interactions and classroom discourse are characterized by several peculiarities that make them different from non-institutional conversations in various contexts.

Many of these characteristics are pertinent to the teachers’ role and authority. Teachers preside the interactions and the interlocutors in classroom discourse as they exert their power to manage the students’ contribution by commencing classroom exchanges, assigning turns, and using their power to manage feedback moves (Lin, 2007). They need to pursue pedagogical purposes. Besides, teachers have the role of a primary knower and manage the discourse in a pre-established way (Lin, 2007). By implementing these functions, teachers can assure that the learners will have sufficient chances to participate in classroom interactions and discussions (Molinari, Mameli, & Gnisci, 2013).

Drawing on the previously conducted studies, it has been evidenced that the initiation, response, feedback (IRF) cycle, depicted by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), is conventionally used as one of the bedrocks of analyses, and it is a ubiquitous pattern in classroom discourse (Cazden, 1988; Gardner, 2019; Hall, 2020; Mehan, 1979; Wells, 1993). The IRF is a teacher-dominant triadic cycle. On a small scale, the onset of this cycle is initiated through a query posed by a teacher directed to a cohort of learners that serves to draw their attention to the didactic purposes of instruction (I). This stage is followed by a response on the part of the learners (R). The second stage projects the third stage (F), in which a teacher either carries out an evaluation or provides feedback on the sufficiency of the student production (Hall, 2020; Hellermann 2003). On a large scale, the IRF can contain both the components in the small scale and structured cycles in large sequences (Walsh, 2011).

The value of IRF to L2 development has been open to various interpretations. According to some scholars, it provides finite opportunities for L2 learners to be engaged in classroom interactions while it promotes teacher authority and teacher-fronted classes (Hall, 2010; Waring, 2008). However, others have argued that the IRF has the potency of being an educational instrument to L2 instruction, and it can also be flexible, providing chances for learners to co-construct knowledge; thereby, maximizing the learning opportunities (Lee, 2007; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Seedhouse, 2004; Waring, 2009). Each cycle of this triadic pattern reacts to the prompt in situ and pedagogic contingencies and objectives of the emerging lesson (Gardner, 2019).

The IRF plays an important role in classroom discourse, and it is accounted as a central structure in classroom dyadic interactions (Waring, 2009). The difference between IRF and Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) cycles lies in the functions teacher’s feedback serves. The way it is adopted and employed varies according to the context in which it is used (Waring,

2009). These three restrictive stages of IRF can be broken to permit classroom interactions to happen with higher frequency and expansion, which are highly possible to facilitate learning opportunities (Sert, 2017; Walsh, 2011). Classroom Interactional Competence can also help the researchers and teachers recognize the IRF patterns as a “locally emergent phenomenon” (van Compernelle, 2015, p. 171).

Previously conducted studies have applied etic perspectives to examine the IRF patterns. Although they have contributed to the expansion of IRF cycles, they have used an etic coding system. To have a better understanding of the efficiency of the IRF pattern, it is of utmost importance not to limit our studies to the teacher’s skills and learning opportunities that arise from their strategies. Hereupon, the students’ contributions and responses to the teacher talk need to be examined (Sert, 2017). More importantly, using the predetermined coding systems cannot capture the dynamic and all levels of granularities of the IRF cycle in classroom interactions (Seedhouse, 2004). To have a fuller picture of the IRF cycle, studies need to consider not only the sequential context of classroom discourse and co-construction but also the nature of the IRF cycle as a phenomenon that is co-constructed by the interlocutors (Li, 2019).

Researchers on the IRF cycle have currently done an endeavor to focus on the collaborative facets of this cycle rather than considering the individual skills, arguing that the classroom discourse has a co-constructive nature being composed of an amalgam of competencies and skills in a situated context (Van Compernelle, 2015). This view reflects that the IRF cycle is a dynamic and fluid pattern in which sequences are co-constructed by both the teachers and students (Li, 2019; Seedhouse, 2004). In other words, the IRF pattern is composed of the stages and an array of contingent utterances that are closely linked to the preceding productions that will impact the proceeding utterances and turn-takings (Sert, 2015; Waring, 2009).

The extant literature on the IRF pattern shows that the studies have mainly focused on the sequences and chains in this cycle. Further studies are required to give an insight into the dynamic and multidimensional nature of classroom interactions, particularly in the context of Iran. This study set out to fill this gap by examining the emerging components in the IRF cycle. This study did not focus on a preplanned and etic coding system to examine this cycle; rather, it attempted to represent a fuller picture of this cycle by not only focusing on the realization of initiation, response, and feedback but also exploring the contingency of these cycles and realization of feedback from both the random and scaffolded perspectives.

## **2. Literature Review**

The IRF cycle, also called IRE, initiation, response, evaluation (Mehan, 1979), is a ubiquitous concept in classroom contexts (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). One of the features of classroom discourse that researchers have consensus on is the triadic exchange structure (Wells (1993). However, Seedhouse (1997) argues that this cycle cannot be a true representative of interactional sequences. Although IRF and IRE are used interchangeably, Hall and Walsh (2002) differentiated between them, stating that the application of IRE signifies teaching as a transmission process while the proponents of the IRF believe that it is an inquiry-based type of learning, which concentrates on discovering, posing questions, testing hypotheses, and resolving problems.

Seedhouse (1997) found that the IRF cycle is a natural process in adult-child interactions; however, Nystrand (1997) considered the IRF use to have negative bearings on knowledge development. Likewise, van Lier (2000) asserted that the IRF cycle restricts the students to practice initiatives. For Wells (1993), the IRF pattern by itself cannot have unfavorable effects, nor does it have favorable influences on learning. Its advantages or drawbacks are determined by what purpose they are employed for and how they are applied in a specific context.

Some studies have focused on what transpires at the feedback stage (F) of this triadic pattern (Jarvis & Robinson, 1997; Nassaji & Wells, 2000). For example, Nassaji and Wells (2000) indicated that the students had more chances to produce more extended responses when they were not restricted by evaluative follow-up; however, negotiation questions were more prone to longer responses. The students' responses could be expanded by adopting "requests, justifications, connections, counterarguments ... or self-selected [contributions]" in the feedback move (Nassaji & Wells, 2000, p. 401). Their findings revealed that to create an interactive exchange and break the limiting cycles of the IRF, teachers could apply negotiations in the feedback stage by breaking the limiting cycles of IRF. In another study, Hellermann (2003) revealed that teacher repetition could acknowledge the students' response or be an indicator of deviant and ill-formed production or response. L2 teachers' repetition in the F stage could elicit a desired form and act as a model for the whole class or implicit feedback, leading to self-reformulation in the subsequent turns.

Additionally, Mercer (1995) attempted to examine the teachers' use of key techniques required to help knowledge construction. Teacher talk initially aims to elicit knowledge from the students. For Mercer (1995), the use of direct elicitation helped teachers to monitor the students' knowledge or share different ideas. Moreover, the teachers used some clues or hints known as cued elicitation to assist students in finding the answer. The second purpose of teacher talk is to respond to what the learners say. Teachers have used different ways such as reformulation confirmation, elaboration, repetition, and rejection to respond to the students' productions. The third purpose of teacher talk is to elaborate on the critical facets of the shared experience. Regarding the IRF cycle, teachers use elicitation techniques in the initiation stage. However, in the third stage known as the feedback stage, teachers use the responding and summarizing techniques.

Li (2014) and Molinari, Mameli, and Gnisci (2013) identified more complex IRF stages. Li (2014) found that teacher talks not only follow the traditional triadic stages but also develop these stages into "teacher-student-teacher student-teacher", "teacher-student1-teacher-student2", or "student-teacher" exchanges (Li, 2014, p. 325) in advanced and Basic English major courses. The findings demonstrated that to develop this cycle, the restrictive and fixed IRF cycle could be broken into more complicated stages and chains. Molinari et al. (2013) have examined the sequence types in the IRF cycle. They identified four sequence types in the IRF cycle, namely "monologic sequences", "scaffolding sequences", "dialogic sequences", and "co-constructive sequences" (Molinari et al., 2013, p. 414).

Investigating the IRF cycle sequences and chains can contribute to understand the interactional patterns that can be found in broader classroom contexts. However, examining the IRF cycles separately and individually may be a vain attempt to gain an insight into the



nature of classroom discourse (Li, 2018). Hereupon, Lefstein, Snell, and Israeli (2015) studied the dichotomy between sequences of moves and abstracted moves. The findings revealed that a concentration on individual moves is not successful at showing the overall structure and quality of moves. The analysis of move sequences reveals changes in the course of time and variations in the instructional practices (Lefstein et al., 2015). The IRF pattern should not be considered as a separate educational tool, rather it should be locally adopted and integrated with pedagogical objectives in the cooperative nature of classroom interactions (Li, 2018).

To focus on the learning opportunities emerging from classroom interactions, especially the IRF cycle, Liu (2008) investigated IRF in the teacher-student interactions in the Singapore-Chinese context. It was found that, in the F stage, L2 teachers could have a paramount role in maximizing and minimizing opportunities for L2 learners. Likewise, the teachers used two different strategies regarding the IRF cycle. One of the teachers acknowledged and reformulated the L2 learners' production to appreciate the learners' contribution. Likewise, when the learners hesitated, they were welcomed by the teacher. Liu (2008) concluded that L2 learning is a co-constructed process by the class members, including the teachers and students. Therefore, L2 teachers need to provide more opportunities for learning by increasing the quality of the IRF cycle.

There is more evidence underpinning the versatility of IRF stages to create learning opportunities and participation structures, which can be achieved by breaking the rigid sequences of triadic pattern. For example, Waring (2008) showed that L2 learners could break the rigid series of IRF and initiate a new phase of interaction which is beneficial for promoting peer participation. Likewise, the explicit positive assessment might cement the third stage and hamper learning opportunities (Waring, 2009). Jacknick (2011) also showed that when L2 learners are given chances to initiate the first stage, their agency is established in their ability to manage the sequences of the classroom talk (Jacknick, 2011).

To enhance learner engagement, Chin (2006) examined how teachers treat questioning to promote engagement in considering conceptual content, which can lead the learners to build their knowledge. Chin (2006) also focused on the F stage of the IRF-series to investigate the different sorts of the feedback given by the teacher. The results revealed the way teachers pose questions and treat the F stage could provide space for further talk and engagement. In the F stage, the teacher not only evaluated the students' productions but also included more questions to encourage further understanding. It also increased the learners' cognitive engagement. The teachers' successive questioning could help the learners share their ideas, develop hypotheses, project consequences, engender accounts, evaluate their productions and deliberate on their thinking, and draw conclusions. The teachers mainly used comments and statements with the purpose of evaluating and developing the students' productions. It was also found that the teacher revoiced the students' productions, which served as a juncture for confirmation and sharing the ideas with the classmates. Besides, the teacher paraphrased the students' contributions which could inspire reticent and reserved students to have the chance to be engaged in the co-construction of productions.

Topic management and initiation by L2 learners can disrupt the IRF pattern and asymmetric power in L2 classrooms. For instance, Dolce and Compennolle (2018) reported that L2 learners

used several strategies to expand the topic under discussion. The students used genuine questions to elicit more elaborations on the topic. They also provided further explanations to add more details and examples to the interaction and the teachers' productions. These actions nudged the teacher to give more information on the concepts and provide feedback on language production. These actions were also versatile to afford L2 teachers an opportunity to elaborate on the learners' contribution. In addition, the learners raised their hands to attract the teachers' attention which indicates that L2 learners had a provisional bid to break the IRF cycle and disrupt the teachers' grip on the interaction; however, L2 teachers presided over the interaction.

In a seminal study, Waring (2009) examined how students ask a pivot question and what measures and factors generate learner-centered initiations. Whenever deviation from the IRF series transpires, more space is provided to have a more sophisticated consideration of the structure under discussion. Moreover, moving out of the IRF series is possible to give L2 learners the chance to reveal their problems that are unrelated to the core structure. Additionally, learners have more agency when there is a chance to move out of the IRF stages. To assess the learners' productions, Waring (2008) also endeavored to provide a conversational analytic account of learning opportunities emerging from IRF when L2 teachers use explicit positive assessment. She reported that while checking assignments and activities, explicit positive assessment hindered more discussion and terminated the IRF pattern.

This hindrance caused by explicit positive assessment did not allow for L2 learners' substantial engagement, and it did not afford the learner with a chance to produce further talk, have discovery learning, and explore the structure. These restrictive features of explicit positive assessment can prevent the opportunities for expressing and understanding difficulties or discovering the correct responses for the wrong productions. She asserted that the significance of feedback needs to be more than being mere corrective. It can provide opportunities for the L2 learners to discover and take steps to analyze their knowledge about their language structures and discursive characteristics of the target language.

The importance of the F stage has been highlighted over the last decades. Several studies have concentrated on the role of positive and negative feedback in promoting or thwarting learner participation (Fagan, 2015; Waring, 2008). Various feedback provided by the teachers in the F turns can influence time and space accessible for perceiving and understanding the pedagogical aims. As for giving feedback, teachers can benefit from a wide range of pedagogical tools (Lee, 2007). These tools hinge on the teachers' experience and competency, the task type, and their awareness about the students' weaknesses and strengths (Fagan, 2015). Teachers can employ an infinite number of strategies to deal with the F stage. For instance, they can employ some clues to inspire learners to make more contributions, ask new queries, and encourage peer correction and the students' further elaborations (Fagan, 2014; Lee, 2007).

To examine the role of repetition in naturally occurring IRF series, Park (2014) used video recordings and transcription. It was reported that repetition in the F stage could promote further talk and opportunities for more classroom interactions. The learners were encouraged to get involved in more meaning and fluency-based interactions, which had some affinities with the real-life and outside classroom contexts. Teachers used repeats in the F stage to indicate and draw the L2 learners' attention to the pedagogical focus and trajectories of the setting. It was

also noticed that repeats in the IRF cycle could maximize the development of the sequence and promote further elaborations. As for the role of the F stage, Lee (2007) reported how this stage in the IRF series could act as a dependent task of reacting to and building on the previous turns and letting the interaction proceed. Zemel and Koschmann (2011) also demonstrated that when L2 teachers reinitiate the triadic dialogue (IRF series) and have a steady endeavor and engagement to spur students on, they can create a converging between the sender and receiver of the message (Schegloff, 1992).

Fagan (2018) investigated how L2 teachers deal with hesitation on the part of students when they respond to a question within IRF stages. Two important practices emerged in the classroom-based discourse information: Modifying facets of task interaction and reshaping the emerging difficulty (Fagan, 2018). When the L2 learners were ambivalent about responding in open-task IRF series, the teacher manipulated features of task interaction to specifically limit the required answer. A complete task manipulation, especially the task participation framework, occurred when the teacher realized the endeavors were in vain to elicit the correct response from the learners. Regarding reframing the displayed difficulty which resulted from coping with the learners' hesitation while doing the closed-task IRF series, the teacher attempted to show that making a mistake is an ordinary part of the class. These mistakes can be considered as learning opportunities; therefore, the problems were reframed positively.

Some studies, however, have shown how classroom talks are prone to depart from the conventional IRF cycle. For instance, Davidson and Groves (2020) investigated the occurrence of multiple-response in classroom interactions and how these multi-reactions are conducive to whole-class interaction. They identified that the lack of teachers' nomination in the initiation phase was a significant contribution of the study as teacher-directed nomination could confine turn-taking in classroom interaction. It was argued that when the teachers refrained from nominating a learner to initiate a turn, the learners were granted more chances for self-selection. Evaluation turn as a ubiquitous feature in the IRF series was absent, which was considered as a unique feature in the classroom talk. Likewise, on-the-spot withdrawal of evaluations led to fewer participation and occupation of turns by the teacher. It was also accentuated that the multiple-response series afforded the learners an opportunity to lead their turn-taking, encouraging the students to take part in classroom interactions.

It has also been discussed that IRF can restrict classroom talk and increase the teachers' dominance, as a result limiting the students' learning opportunities. For example, Alexander (2008), based on action research, reported that the teachers controlled the classroom interactions and obviated dialogic talk as they were employing closed questions and providing infinite feedback. Alexander (2008) concluded that classroom interaction rather represents recitation than a dialogue. Likewise, Lysle (2008) reported the existence of IRF characters might restrict the students' participation. Considering all the uses and restrictions of IRF, this study sought to explore the IRF sequences in teacher-student interactions through a detailed, sequential, and context-based analysis of the classroom discourse.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Corpus

In this study, classroom interactions of 8 EFL classes were recorded and documented. As Nunan and Bailey (2009) put it, “three basic approaches to document classroom interaction are (1) through the use of observation systems to code data (either in real-time or using recorded data), (2) by recording and transcribing classroom interactions, and less commonly, (3) by producing ethnographic narratives” (p. 259). The corpus in this study entailed video recordings of 90-min classes, corresponding to a total of about 900 minutes. There were ten classes with about seven students in each of them. The transcribed data, drawn from Iranian EFL classrooms, were coded based on the IRF cycles in teacher-student classroom interactions. The data were collected from a popular English language institute in Tehran, Iran, with more than 1000 elementary, intermediate, and advanced level EFL learners. The participants in this study were 70 Iranian upper-intermediate students with the age range from 22 to 35. The teachers were eight non-native EFL teachers, with their ages ranging from 28 to 45, teaching English in non-state (private) English language institutes in Iran. The teachers were either Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) graduates or had taken teacher training courses in advance. The information related to the participants is indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants’ demographic information

| Participants | N  | Age   | Male | Female | Educational background |
|--------------|----|-------|------|--------|------------------------|
| Teachers     | 8  | 28-45 | 5    | 3      | EFL graduates          |
| Students     | 70 | 22-35 | 42   | 28     | Upper-intermediate     |
| Classes      | 10 |       |      |        |                        |

#### 3.2 Data Analysis Procedure

To examine the IRF cycle, classroom interactions of ten EFL classes were transcribed and Conversation Analysis (CA), as an important ethnomethodological approach to analyzing the spoken data (Markee, 2000), were employed. By considering the complexity of such interactions in which meanings are generally formed and co-constructed by the participants (Walsh, 2011), CA can contribute to unfolding micro details of talk-in-interaction. With its microanalytic lens, sequential focus, bottom-up approach, analysis of context, and emic perspective, CA assists the researchers to unravel how the pedagogical practices unfold and are co-constructed in talk-in-interaction (Sert, 2017). Utilization of CA needs a very detailed scrutiny of turn-taking, repair actions of interlocutors, and sequence organization (Sert, 2017). The obtained data were transcribed and analyzed line-by-line using the system developed by Ten Have (2007) (Appendix). The emerging data from the CA were then coded based on what has been suggested for teacher-students classroom interactions, the Scheme for Educational Dialogue Analysis (SEDA), and the structure disclosing the discourse moves and processes (Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003).

### 4. Results

The analysis of the corpus data revealed that there were 784 triadic cycles. Given that the total time of the analyzed videos was 900 minutes, the frequency of the identified cycles was 0.87. This indicates that this pattern is ubiquitous in classroom interaction. Table 2 illustrates the descriptive statistics of initiations, responses, and follow-ups. As can be seen, *new questions*



constituted 47.1% of all the teacher initiations. This is congruent with Wells' (1993) view about the significance of differentiating the nuclear exchanges from the bound exchanges. The nuclear exchanges are utilized to initiate a new interaction, while the bound exchanges are employed to expand a preceding interaction. Of 784 IRF, 414 (86.3%) were bound, while 370 (47.1%) were nuclear. As for bound questions, *elaborations*, which are employed to encourage the students to expand on their contributions, were meaningfully more than *relaunches*, which are used to ask the same question from a new student, with 39.2% and 13.5% respectively. Regarding their form, there was a negligible difference between *authentic* (50.7%) and *focused* (49.2%) questions.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for teachers' initiation, students' response, and teachers' follow-up

|                                  |                             | N   | %    |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----|------|
|                                  | <b>Teachers' questions</b>  |     |      |
| <b>Function</b>                  | New question                | 370 | 47.1 |
|                                  | Elaboration                 | 308 | 39.2 |
|                                  | Relaunch                    | 106 | 13.5 |
|                                  | <i>Total</i>                | 784 | 100  |
| <b>Type</b>                      | Authentic                   | 398 | 50.7 |
|                                  | Focused                     | 386 | 49.2 |
|                                  | <i>Total</i>                | 784 | 100  |
| <b>Form</b>                      | <b>Students' answers</b>    |     |      |
|                                  | Requested                   | 640 | 81.6 |
|                                  | Not requested/substituting  | 144 | 18.3 |
|                                  | <i>Total</i>                | 784 | 100  |
| <b>Correctness</b>               | Correct                     | 418 | 53.3 |
|                                  | Partially correct/incorrect | 236 | 30.1 |
|                                  | Not assessable              | 130 | 16.5 |
|                                  | <i>Total</i>                | 784 | 100  |
| <b>Production</b>                | Minimal                     | 392 | 50   |
|                                  | Complex                     | 387 | 49.3 |
|                                  | Not assessable              | 5   | 0.6  |
|                                  | <i>Total</i>                | 784 | 100  |
|                                  | <b>Teachers' follow-ups</b> |     |      |
| <b>Teaching-learning process</b> | Simple                      | 252 | 32.1 |
|                                  | Scaffold                    | 192 | 24.4 |
|                                  | Refusal/missing             | 24  | 3    |
|                                  | Elaboration                 | 316 | 40.3 |
|                                  | <i>Total</i>                | 784 | 100  |
| <b>Relational quality</b>        | Qualifying                  | 78  | 9.9  |
|                                  | Disqualifying               | 16  | 2    |
|                                  | Neutral                     | 690 | 88   |
|                                  | <i>Total</i>                | 784 | 100  |

As for the students' responses, *correct* (53.3%), *requested* (81.6%), *minimal* (50%), and *complex* (49.3%) accounted for the most answers. This shows that classroom interactions are mainly controlled by the teachers as they direct questions to particular students. Likewise, the teachers hold a grip on by asking focused questions as there is not a meaningful difference between *authentic* and *focused* questions. Another emerging component in the response phase was *uptakes* and *acknowledgement*, which came after the corrective feedback provided by the teachers. Uptake is defined as the learner's response that promptly pursues the instructor's feedback as a reaction to the teacher's directing of attention to the specific facets of the learner's primal utterance (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In this study, there were 178 successful *uptakes* and 26 *acknowledgements* on the part of the learners. However, uptake was missing in previous studies as they focused on the three main components of the IRF pattern.

The analysis of the follow-ups revealed that, in 40.3% of the cases, the teachers tended to *elaborate* and *enrich* the students' contributions, while *scaffolding* and *simple* follow-ups accounted for about one in fourth and about one in three respectively. Regarding the relational quality, *neutral* (88%) and *qualifying* (9.9%) were more frequent.

As mentioned above, uptake and acknowledgement were two new elements that surfaced in this study, and this can lead to offering a new version for this triadic pattern. This traditional triadic pattern can be modified to IRFU, in which U stands for uptake. The role of successful uptake in L2 development and increasing the learners' awareness of feedback and process have been reported in pertinent studies (Lyster, 2007; Heift & Hegelheimer, 2017). To have a deeper understanding of uptake, two samples are presented in the following.

### Excerpt 1

#### Uptake

224. T: you)) you Omid, you tell me
225. S2; most of the time, I hum contact (1.3) other friends a::nd guys I prefer to: social networking.
226. T: prefer to: use
227. →S2: <prefer to use social networking> for job a:nd for job and *hs* situation I use hum email a::nd=
228. T: =sorry you said for job and those things related to the job you use ↓email why?
229. S2: because it is common to use email hum hum, it's not common to use social networking or contact to=
230. T: =it is not common (2:45) not (2) polite=
231. →S2:=not polite yes
232. T: and not formal
233. →S2: not formal ((nodding))
234. T: it's not formal, for example, to send a message to <a boss in telegram>
235. S2: yes, yes
236. T: good (.) what else?
237. S2: a:nd hum for and (3)
238. T: do you call other people when you want to communicate?
239. S2: fo::r necessary (3)
240. T: why?

241. S2: hum >for example< °I want to say° hum important message to my family my friends yes I am calling them.
242. T: you call them
243. S2: → but most of the time (2) hum I prefer to use social media
244. T: social media (3) very doo::d (3) can you tell me why you don't use calling when you have something to say. (2)
245. S2: hum, I don't like call
246. T: you don't like calling, yeah
247. → S2: <I don't like calling> and for for example during the wee::k hum at most I use my cellphone to calling hum (3) ten minutes
248. T: ten minutes
249. S2: ten minutes
250. T: me too (.) I don't like calling and talking to people ((inaudible)) (Transcripts, Pos. 1540-1566)

The study was not limited to using a formal categorical system. It rather attempted to examine how the teachers' contributions in the third stage are contingent on the students' response in the IRF cycle as what teachers do in the third stage is not foreseeable, and it is rather dependent on the prior turns (Lee, 2007). The analysis of the IRF pattern went beyond the common analytical frameworks and unraveled that while employing the IRF cycle, as Table 3 shows, teachers used *parsing*, *steering*, and *intimating answers* to respond to the local contingencies. The following excerpt shows the exchange in which the teacher has used the parsing strategy to divide the question into several components. The teacher's parsing was reliant on the response provided by the students in the second stage. Not satisfied with the students' contributions, the teachers used further three-turn sequences to provide the students with additional resources to come up with the required answer.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of parsing, steering, and intimating answer

|                          | N  | %    |
|--------------------------|----|------|
| <b>Parsing</b>           | 17 | 51.5 |
| <b>Steering</b>          | 9  | 27.2 |
| <b>Intimating answer</b> | 7  | 21.2 |
| <b>Total</b>             | 33 | 100  |

### Excerpt 2

#### Parsing

331. T: the next picture °next picture°
332. S1: it's kind of accident?
333. T: aha, it's a kinda accident
334. S1: yeah
335. T: what is happening?
336. S1: it's ((inaudible)) on her ((inaudible))
337. T: oh oh oh (.) why do you think that has happened? (0.2) what is your reason that=
338. S2: =because hum on the other hand there is a laptop

339. T: aha
340. S3: °she is ↓talking°
341. T: she is talking; she is not focused
342. S4: she couldn't be ((inaudible))
343. T: you shouldn't work with your laptop while you are drinking coffee (.) this is the lesson of this picture
344. S1: ((inaudible)) she fall hum she (.) fell the coffee instead of laptop
345. S2: spoil? ((she is trying to correct s1))
346. T: no spoil no spill spill
347. S2: spill
348. T: spill spill (Transcripts, Pos. 934-951)

Moreover, the teachers used the third turn in a recycling way to direct the students in a specific direction. The step-by-step questions asked by the teacher show a directional goal of steering the students into a specific interactional path (Lee, 2007; Macbeth, 2000). The following excerpt demonstrates how the teacher employs steering to direct the student toward the grammatically erroneous segment of the sentence.

### Excerpt 3 Steering

408. T: Omid? How to you cook? Can give us the instruction?
409. S1: hum first I boiled the water
410. T: look (.) Omid boiled the water ((writes on the whiteboard)) so what is the subject?
411. Ss: Omid
412. T: Omid is the subject; what is the verb?
413. Ss: boiled
414. T: boiled ((writes on the whiteboard)) (8:12) and what is the object?
415. Ss: the water
416. T: what is an active sentence?
417. S1: when we have the subject=
418. S2: and the subject is important
419. T: yes the subject is important, and we want to talk about the subject, and we know the subject (1) sometimes we don't know the subject. Look at this sentence. We don't mention the subject. I put the object here ((writes on the whiteboard)) so a new subject (1:36) the water ((writes on the whiteboard)) after that we put a new verb after that I can use by plus subject, or it's optional (.) so what is the new verb?
420. S1: is boiled
421. T: the new verb is is boiled (1:10); how can I make this new verb?
422. S: be + verb



423. T: be +verb (.) what kind of be?
424. S3: am, is, are
425. T: am, is, are because the sentence is present
426. SS: present
427. T: but when the tense is past, we use.,??,
428. Ss: was and were
429. T: if it is present perfect (.) we have to use .,??,
430. S1: have
431. S2: have
432. T: have been and has been ok? You have to use have/has+been+past participle of the main verb (8.16) any question? Because we want to talk about food preparation we use simple present ok? So:: now make some sentences about food preparation using passive sentences (.) you tell me (9.32)
433. S: (9.32)
434. T: for example, like this when we want to make omelet (1.10) butter is melted butter is melted first (.) now you make another sentence
435. S: (4.35) spaghetti boiled *hs* spaghetti hum (3.24)
436. T: spaghetti boiled?
437. S: grilled (.) grilled
438. T: grilled (.) you are not a good cook ((students laughing))
439. S: not about spaghetti, for example [chicken
440. T: chicken]
441. S: chicken grilled hum (2.13) chicken is grilled.
442. T: chicken is grilled (.) goo:d but very short I want you to make longer sentences (8.16) ok (Transcripts, Pos. 1822-1856)

As noticed, the third turn can be the locus of several three-turns. The third turn can complete the preceding response while initiating another (Van Lier, 1988). In the F stage, teachers used *intimating answers* to suggest what type of answer they were seeking. The following excerpt demonstrates how the teacher used the *intimating answer* in the F stage to make the students be cognitively engaged with the time clause.

#### Excerpt 4

##### Intimating answer

103. T: before is a time expression, but why do we call this time clause?
104. S: when we hum when when I sa::y before you start the clause.
105. T: because it is a sentence
106. S2: it has subject and verb
107. T: yeah, it's not just a word; it's a↑clause, a short sentence, ok?

108. S3: in farsi, it's Band  
 109. T: yes, it needs another sentence to make sense  
 110. S2: an independent sentence  
 111. T: yes, great (Transcripts, Pos. 1893-1901)

As Table 4 demonstrates, the results also revealed that the teachers used different corrective feedback in the third stage of this pattern. The F stage can be employed in various ways to accomplish several functions (Nassaji & Wells, 2000). Corrective feedback not only changes the input L2 learners are exposed to but also encourages students to modify their productions (Gass & Mackey, 2006). The analysis of the data showed that the teacher had an inclination to provide *recast*, *elicitation*, and *clarification request*, accounting for 32.4%, 15.9%, and 13.9% respectively. Besides, *metalinguistic comments*, *repetition*, *explicit correction*, and *paralinguistic signals*, which constituted 10.8%, 8.2%, 10.3%, and 8.2% of the feedback, were identified in the third stage.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics of teachers' feedback and students' response and uptake

| Teachers' Random Feedback            | N   | %    |
|--------------------------------------|-----|------|
| Metalinguistic comments              | 21  | 10.8 |
| Repetition                           | 16  | 8.2  |
| Clarification Request                | 27  | 13.9 |
| Elicitation                          | 31  | 15.9 |
| Recast                               | 63  | 32.4 |
| Explicit correction                  | 20  | 10.3 |
| Paralinguistic signals               | 16  | 8.2  |
| <i>Total</i>                         | 194 | 100  |
| <b>Teachers' Negotiated Feedback</b> | 15  | 100  |
| <i>Total</i>                         | 15  | 100  |
| <b>Students' Response</b>            |     |      |
| Uptake                               | 142 | 73.1 |
| Acknowledgment                       | 32  | 16.4 |
| No-uptake                            | 20  | 10.3 |
| <i>Total</i>                         | 194 | 100  |

Another compelling feature of the provided feedback was the difference between negotiated and random feedback. The scrutiny of the data indicated that the teachers used negotiated/scaffolded feedback to assist L2 learners go beyond their present level of development and have self-correction. From a sociocultural perspective, teachers as experts can adjust their initial assistance to L2 learners by offering implicit hints and then moving toward more explicit input until the student has enough help to reach self-correction (Aljaafreh & Lantolf 1994; Nassaji & Swain 2000; Rassaei, 2014). The following excerpt shows how the scaffolded feedback is implemented to assist the learner in noticing the erroneous use of the word request.

#### Excerpt 5

136. T: Mohammadreza (4) sometimes there are a lot of advertising messages  
 137. : yes

138. T: yes, what do you do to ( ) their message? (4) what do you do? (3:10)  
 139. S2: yes (.) I hum (1:32) I don't like these messages  
 140. T: I don't?  
 141. S2: I don't like these messages  
 142. T: ok, what do you do?  
 143. S2: I I request to: them hum to  
 144. T: request? Request is not a verb (4)  
 145. S2: hum, I want  
 146. T: want or?  
 147. S2: let?  
 148. T: No No synonym of want (1:28) ask  
 149. SS: ask  
 150. T:ask (.) so I ask  
 151. S2: I ask them to:: hum (2:32) hum to stop this  
 152. T: so I ask them to stop (.), so after ( ) it's ok to use to (.) yes?  
 153. S2: Yes (Transcripts, Pos. 1660-1677)

In sum, the IRF cycle in classroom interactions was used to query several questions types, provide a range of responses to L2 learners' contributions to have an extended stretch of interaction, and have more students be engaged in classroom interactions. Besides, the F stage was a springboard for providing numerous types of corrective feedback and scaffolding. The teachers benefited from the F stage to use situational contingency, and uptake was another important component of this triadic cycle.

## 5. Discussion

The results obtained, with both quantitative and qualitative analysis, gave evidence to the ubiquity of the IRF cycle in L2 classroom interaction. The findings demonstrated that the triadic dialogue is conducive to not only prolonged interactive sequences that are capable of involving more than one student but also creating space for providing scaffolding, especially the negotiated/scaffolded feedback. Likewise, the F stage in IRFs showed to be a juncture for contingent ways of actions for L2 teachers. Given that the IRF cycle is one of the bedrocks of L2 classroom interaction, studies should not limit their focus on the single IRF cycle and the fragmentations that arise from it. However, the researchers need to go beyond this restrictive perspective and focus on the multilayered sequences of the chained IRF patterns. The results showed that the teachers are equipped with several tools to expand the discourse in various forms and directions. To discuss these findings, various sequences emerging from the sequential analyses are presented.

The teachers in just over a half of the cases used authentic questions. At the first stage, the teachers spurred the learners on to provide unknown and original answers, which did not suppress the students' contributions rather made it possible for the students to be engaged in making extended contributions (Walsh, 2011). Besides, congruent with Nassaji and Wells's (2000) findings, the use of authentic questions made it possible for both teachers and learners to co-construct the understanding of a subject for which there was no predetermined or known answer, and after discussing several options, they finally reached an agreement. Authentic questions are also capable of enhancing the students' oral proficiency or bolster discussion (Walsh, 2011).

At the second stage, the students did an endeavor to give both complex and minimal answers. The difference between complex and minimal answers was negligible, which indicated that in about 50% of the cases the questions asked by the teachers were successful in eliciting rich responses from the students. At the F stage, the teachers' elaboration showed their tendency for co-constructive sequence, accounting for about 41% of the teachers' feedback. Elaboration as a form of co-constructive sequence helped the teachers avoid suppressing the learners' contributions and encouraged the students to provide extended productions.

Given that the teachers tended to avoid using an evaluative function and gave up having the role of a primary knower, their elaborations and request for further elaborations ushered in longer sequences and augmented the chances for further IRFs (Molinari et al., 2013). At this stage, co-constructive sequences are evident in which the teachers, without trying to abuse their authority and role, asked for further elaboration by using clarifications, asking for reformulations, requesting justifications, and posing counterarguments to help the students use their reasoning, thinking, and deduction skills (Molinari et al., 2013; Nassaji & Wells, 2000). Therefore, these co-constructive sequences can create space for L2 learners to be engaged in dialogic interaction and knowledge construction (Walsh, 2011).

In focused questions, accounting for about 50% of the questions, the IRF allows the teacher to monitor or test how successfully the taught materials have been understood (Walsh, 2011). It is also a fruitful occasion for the co-construction of knowledge. The findings of this study and other studies have indicated that asking focused questions, also known as known information, is ubiquitous in classroom settings. Although these questions restrict the students' opportunities to test their ideas, they can direct the students' attention toward the particular discourse of the discipline (Nassaji & Wells, 2000).

As for the students' errors, the teachers treated them in different ways. In about 25% of the cases, instead of giving evaluative feedback, the teachers used scaffolding in the F stage to feed in the required support. Scaffolding plays an important role in L2 classroom interaction, and it is considered to be one of the characteristics of interactional features in materials, skills and system, and classroom context mode (Walsh, 2011). Although it has been claimed that this triadic cycle provides L2 learners with finite opportunities for participation (Waring, 2008), the findings of this study and some other studies have maintained that IRF is a fruitful pedagogical instrument (Lee, 2007; Seedhouse, 2004). Congruent with Li's (2019) findings, it was observed that the teachers used scaffolding to break the restrictive IRF pattern to create learning opportunities for L2 learners.

One of the compelling findings of the current study was the negotiated/scaffolded feedback, having its origins in the sociocultural perspective, which was ignored in previous studies as they mainly examined the teachers' evaluative actions or different types of corrective feedback in the F stage from a cognitive-interactionist perspective. Providing scaffolded/negotiated feedback, the teachers offered implicit hints to the learners to help them notice their erroneous productions and then moved to more explicit assistance until the students had sufficient information to reach self-correction. Targeting the learners' ZDP (zone of proximal development), the scaffolded feedback in the F stage showed to be conducive for breaking the



restrictive IRF, keeping the interaction on track, and expanding the exchanges while drawing the learners' attention to the particular aspects of their interlanguage.

Not only does managing the learners' contributions through scaffolded feedback have a pivotal role in form-focused instruction but also the scaffolded feedback and repairing the learner input are central to shaping the learners' contributions (Walsh, 2011). In a study, Rassaei (2017) found that the scaffolded feedback tailored to the learners' ZPD can enhance L2 learners' knowledge. Applying the scaffolded feedback can also promote the students' agency and engagement to achieve co-regulation (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Receiving the scaffolded feedback, L2 learners are not only more likely to be exposed to both positive and negative evidence but also afforded with the opportunities to take advantage of the modified output (Swain, 2005). Thus, IRF is capable of being used as a pedagogical instrument, and departures from this triadic pattern increases the learning opportunities for gaining an insight into issues emerging from the IRF (Waring, 2009).

A diligent scrutiny of interactions in IRF demonstrated that the provided feedback in the F stage can obtain uptake on the part of the learners. As can be seen in excerpt 1, one of the students, Omid, in the response phase was expressing his ideas about using social media. Talking about his preference, Omid tried to use "prefer to" in line 225 but his production was ill-formed. Then the teacher provided the correct form in line 226, which was followed by an uptake in line 227. The teacher and student maintained the interaction, and in line 243 Omid successfully used the correct form "prefer to" in his production. This successful uptake indicates the efficiency of the feedback.

This compelling finding shows that one important component should be added to the IRF cycle in classroom interaction. Therefore, the triadic cycle can be remodeled as IRFU, Initiation/Response/Feedback/Uptake. It can be argued that the F stage should not be considered as the ultimate phase and the teachers need to be meticulous about the uptake to be certain if the provided correct form of a linguistic feature is internalized. Likewise, the uptake following the feedback can give us an insight into the students' engagement with feedback and the proceduralization of L2 knowledge (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020). The uptake aspect can be a fruitful occasion for promoting the pushed output (Li & Vuono, 2019; Swain, 2005).

The mentioned findings uncovered that the third stage was versatile. It was also found that the F stage was fertile for the teachers' contingent actions that were reliant on the students' contributions in the second stage. To throw off the shackles of the functional typologies and analytical undertakings, the current study presented the details of the connections between the sequences in interaction. As can be seen in excerpt 2, the teacher made an effort to parse the question into different parts. It was found that when the students had problems in their productions, the teachers drew on the students' responses in the second turn and shrank the first question to manageable components to provide resources for the students to come up with the correct answer the teacher was targeting. Parsing in the F stage assisted the teacher in eliciting further responses from the students. These findings confirm the participation frameworks teachers employ to mobilize the students' contribution and next-turn (Walper, Reed, & Marsden, 2021).

Furthermore, as excerpt 3 indicates, the teacher used the steering method by several question and answer exchanges to direct the students toward a particular grammar point. At the F stage, the teachers were attempting to make pedagogical commentaries while they formulated another question to let the interaction proceed. Hence, the F stage is a juncture for making a multitude of meanings, and it is contingent on the students' contributions (Lee, 2007; Walper et al., 2021). Another contingency can be seen when the teachers in the F stage tried to intimate what type of answer they were seeking. The pedagogical acts that teachers used were contingent on and built on the students' productions in the second turn. Teachers' turn design when applying intimating answers could help them realize the students' linguistic competencies. Using parsing, steering, and intimating answers increases the chances for the students to generate relevant contributions and show their attentiveness to the unraveling contingencies (Walper et al., 2021).

A thorough inspection of CA showed the detailed organization of this triadic cycle and how the IRF was managed by the students and teachers to accomplish pedagogical goals. This study showed that this triadic cycle paved the way to employ the co-constructed pedagogy, scaffolding, and engagement in the L2 classrooms. It also evidenced that the F stage was not the final phase in this triadic cycle.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

This study examined how the IRF was realized in teacher-student interactions in L2 classrooms. It was found that this triadic pattern is ubiquitous in L2 classrooms. Conversation analysis revealed that IRF would be a versatile pedagogical tool because this triadic pattern showed to be conducive for getting more than one student to be engaged in classroom interaction. While using the IRF, the teachers created space for prolonged interactive sequences, providing scaffolding, especially the negotiated/scaffolded feedback and various random corrective feedback. The teachers asked both authentic and focused questions in the F stage; however, authentic questions were more successful in eliciting the extended contributions (Walsh, 2011). The employment of elaboration in the third turn also resulted in applying the co-constructive sequences. Hence, it can be concluded that using scaffolding, asking authentic questions, and elaborations on the students' contributions can lead to co-constructive sequences that can create space for L2 learners to be engaged in dialogic interaction and knowledge construction (Walsh, 2011).

It was observed that the teachers used scaffolding, particularly, scaffolded feedback to break the restrictive IRF pattern to create learning opportunities for L2 learners. Negotiated/scaffolded feedback, having its origins in the sociocultural perspective, is more prone to encourage expanded exchanges while keeping the interaction moving forward and promoting the learners' agency and engagement in classroom interactions (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Hence, based on the findings, the traditional version of the IRF can be remodeled as IRFU in which U is concerned with uptake, indicating that the F stage should not be considered as the final stage. Rather, it needs to consider that the uptake following feedback shows the students' engagement with feedback. The third stage is a suitable juncture to implement contingency as teachers draw on the learners' response in the second stage to use steering,

parsing, and intimating answers to embark on reckoning the L2 learners' weaknesses and strengths.

The focus of the study was on the interactional details, which led to an understanding that the third turn is reliant on the second turn and shapes the students' subsequent contributions. Therefore, the third turn gives us an insight into the practical granularities of classroom interaction which are highly contingent. Besides, the third turn can be a springboard for engaging the learners in classroom interaction, employing co-constructive pedagogy, having prolonged exchanges, evaluating the students' contributions, correcting their deviant productions, and reformulating questions. All in all, the results indicated that the IRF cycle is a multilayer tool in which teachers need to make their pedagogical decisions based on the emerging context-bound contingencies rather than top-down employment of teaching and training strategies.

As the findings revealed, the IRF sequences are dynamic and highly interconnected with pedagogical goals and strategies (Pekarek Doehler, 2018). L2 teachers can benefit from the dynamic nature of the IRFs in classroom interactions to provide L2 learners with learning opportunities. These findings also give teachers insights into the implementation of co-constructive pedagogy and ad-hoc contingency. Detailed examination of the IRF interactions maximizes the teachers' awareness about the practical implementation of classroom interaction and ensuing outcomes. The obtained data from micro-analysis classroom interactions can be used in teacher education to equip novice and pre-service teachers with sufficient tools to employ the triadic pattern to engage and scaffold L2 learners in classroom interactions. The scrutiny of the sequences affords the language researchers the opportunity to come up with novel ways of examining the classroom discourse.

With all its implications, this study is not devoid of limitations. As this study mainly focused on examining classroom interactions in one language institute in Iran, the results cannot be generalized to all L2 EFL and ESL classroom interactions. Furthermore, the study analyzed the IRF pattern and how the teachers treated the F stage. The F stage proved to be a rich juncture for providing various corrective feedback, whose efficiency in leading to uptake was not analyzed. Likewise, the current study did not consider the role of teacher's experience in employing the IRF and creating learning opportunities. This study also did not examine the L2 learners' role in the realization of IRF. These are all great avenues for further and future research in the domain of classroom interactions and discourse.

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**Appendix: Conversation Analysis Transcription Conventions (Ten Have, 2007)**

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
|             | <b>Sequence</b>   |
| [           | A single left bracket indicates the point of overlap onset.   |
| ]           | A single right bracket indicates the point at which an utterance or utterance-part terminates vis-à-vis another.  |
| =           | Equal signs, one at the end of one line and one at the beginning of a next, indicate no 'gap' between the two lines. This is often called latching.   |
|             | <b>Timed intervals</b>  |
| (0.0)       | Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in silence by tenth of seconds, so (7.1) is a pause of 7 seconds and one-tenth of a second   |
| (.)         | A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny 'gap' within or between utterances.   |
|             | <b>Characteristics of speech production</b>   |
| <u>word</u> | Underscoring indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude; an alternative method is to print the stressed part in italics  |
| ::          | Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound.<br>Multiple colons indicate a more prolonged sound.  |
| -           | A dash indicates a cut-off.   |
| .,??,       | Punctuation marks are used to indicate characteristics of speech production, especially intonation; they are not referring to grammatical units; an alternative is an italicized question mark?   |
| .           | A period indicates a stopping fall in tone.   |
| ,           | A comma indicates a continuing intonation, like when you are reading items from a list.   |
| ?           | A question mark indicates a rising intonation.  |
| ,?          | The combined question mark/comma indicates a stronger rise than a comma but weaker than a question mark.  |
|             | The absence of an utterance-final marker indicates some sort of 'indeterminate' contour.  |
| ↑↓          | Arrows indicate marked shifts into higher or lower pitch in the utterance part immediately following the arrow  |
| WORD        | Upper case indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.   |
| °           | Utterances or utterance-parts bracketed by degree signs are relatively quieter than the surrounding talk.   |
| <>          | Right/left carets bracketing an utterance or utterance-part indicate speeding up.   |
| ·hhh        | A dot-prefixed row of hs indicates an inbreath. Without the dot, the hs indicates an outbreath.   |
| w(h)ord     | A parenthesized h, or a row of hs within a word, indicates breathiness, as in laughter, crying, etc.  |
|             | <b>Transcriber's doubts and comments</b>  |
| ( )         | Empty parentheses indicate the transcriber's inability to hear what was said. The length of the parenthesized space indicates the length of the untranscribed talk. In the speaker designation column, the empty parentheses indicate the inability to identify a speaker |
| (word)      | Parenthesized words are especially dubious hearings or speaker identifications.   |
| (( ))       | Double parentheses contain transcriber's descriptions rather than, or in addition to, transcriptions.   |